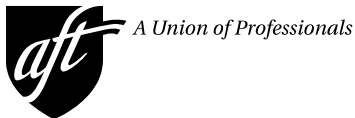




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**SCHOOL VOUCHERS:
THE RESEARCH TRACK RECORD
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**



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SCHOOL VOUCHERS: THE RESEARCH TRACK RECORD STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

About 15 years ago, a moribund private-school voucher movement gained new life when advocates started promising that vouchers would improve academic achievement, particularly among disadvantaged youngsters. That promise continues to be made. But now that there is a sizable body of evidence proving its hollowness and new legislative interest in “research-based” policy and practice, voucher advocates are increasingly shifting back to ideological arguments that can neither be proven nor disproven. Most advocates fiercely resist attempts to require independent evaluations of publicly funded voucher programs. And many of them now even minimize the importance of student achievement altogether when it comes to private school vouchers—but not when the subject is public school accountability, especially under the tough achievement standards of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

But improving student achievement, particularly among disadvantaged children, continues to matter a great deal. It matters especially when there are competing claims on diminishing public treasuries and strained education budgets. Vouchers must therefore continue to be evaluated against the standard of student achievement. As the following summary demonstrates, research conducted from 1990, when the nation’s first publicly funded voucher program began in Milwaukee, to the present fails to support the claim that vouchers improve student achievement.

Milwaukee Parental Choice [Voucher] Program (MPCP, started in 1990)

- Participating private schools are not required to test students or publicly report results as a condition of receiving public dollars (in 2004-05, up to \$5,943 per voucher student). Pro-voucher legislators terminated the state’s evaluation of MPCP in 1995. Consequently, Wisconsin taxpayers are in the dark about the academic outcomes of a program that now enrolls 15,035 students and is estimated to cost more than \$87 million this year alone.¹
- The state-mandated evaluation (1990-95) headed by John Witte of the University of Wisconsin-Madison found no differences in reading and math achievement between voucher students and their public school peers.²
- Harvard University’s Paul Peterson, a voucher advocate, and his team reanalyzed the state’s MPCP evaluation and claimed to find that by the third and fourth year of attending a private school, voucher users outperformed the public school control group in reading and math. The researchers’ own tables show a statistically significant result only in math and only in the fourth year. Moreover, their data showed that voucher students who were still in MPCP by that time were a more advantaged group than the comparison students in public schools.³
- A second reanalysis of the state’s MPCP evaluation by Princeton University’s Cecilia Rouse found no effect from vouchers in reading and a small effect in math for MPCP students who had remained in the program over the four-year period. Rouse also found that the large number of

dropouts (or pushouts) from MPCP were primarily students who had been performing poorly in the private schools.⁴

- A follow-up study by Rouse found that low-income students attending Milwaukee public schools served by a state class-size reduction and enrichment program significantly outperformed voucher students in reading and scored as well in math.⁵

Cleveland Scholarship [Voucher] and Tutoring Program (CSTP, started in 1996)

- In 2004-05, CSTP enrolled an estimated 5,675 students at a budgeted cost of \$17,901,887. The lion's share of the cost for CSTP has been funded by reducing the Cleveland public school district's amount of state Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid by \$11,901,887.⁶ The state of Ohio contracted with a team of researchers led by Kim Metcalf of Indiana University to evaluate CSTP. The most recent results of their longitudinal study (1998-2003) were released in October 2004.⁷
- The Metcalf evaluation found no achievement differences in five out of six subjects—and no difference in overall achievement—between voucher students who had attended private schools from kindergarten through grade 5 and the two public school comparison groups (applied for vouchers but did not receive, did not apply for vouchers).⁸ These results are particularly striking because although Metcalf controlled for race, he did not account for family income differences between the public and private school students.
- At the *beginning* of first grade, students who had entered CSTP as kindergartners had significantly higher achievement than the public school comparison groups (no data are provided on whether these students had attended kindergarten). By the *end* of the first grade, the public school groups had closed that gap.⁹
- Overall, students in the public school comparison groups made greater *gains* from first through fifth grade than the voucher students, even though the voucher students were less likely to be African-American and low income.¹⁰

Florida Opportunity Scholarship [Voucher] Program (started in 1999; twice struck down as unconstitutional by state courts, but operating while on appeal to the state's Supreme Court)

- Any student enrolled in a public school that is deemed "failing" for two of the previous four years under the state's testing and accountability program (A-Plus) is eligible for a private school voucher equal to the per-pupil public school expenditure or the total tuition and fees of the private school, whichever is less. The Florida legislature has never provided for an evaluation of the program.¹¹
- In 2001, a study by voucher proponent Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute, a voucher advocacy group, found that the mere threat of losing students to vouchers caused public schools rated as failing in 1999 to improve.¹² To test Greene's claim, Doug Harris of the Economic Policy Institute analyzed achievement in Florida's schools before and after the threat of vouchers was introduced.

There were no clear differences in the improvement of low-achieving (or other) schools pre- and post-vouchers, which makes Greene's claim insupportable.¹³

- A reanalysis of Greene's study by Gregory Camilli and Katrina Bulkley, both of Rutgers University, found that his methods produced greatly inflated estimates of the gains in the voucher-threatened "failing" schools and that his results failed to account for the effect of the substantial new resources that had been put into those schools.¹⁴
- In 2003, Greene and Marcus Winters updated the 2001 Greene study and again found that a voucher threat improves low-achieving schools, now adding that improvements were "in direct proportion" to the degree of that threat.¹⁵ Differences among schools and student characteristics were only partially accounted for in the analysis, nor did the study consider the impact on schools of the threat of NCLB sanctions.

Florida's John M. McKay Scholarship [Vouchers] for Students with Disabilities Program (started statewide in 2001)

- Florida does not require student testing or public reporting of achievement for participating private schools, which do not have to employ any special education teachers. Nor has the state provided for an evaluation. There currently are about 13,700 students receiving McKay vouchers, which cost taxpayers \$72,314,026 in 2004-05. Parents who accept a voucher waive rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).¹⁶

D.C. Choice [Voucher] Incentive Program (enacted by Congress in 2004 and targeting the District of Columbia, this is the first federally funded voucher program in the nation)

- This five-year, \$14 million voucher "demonstration" project is targeted to low-income students, with priority access for students attending D.C. public schools that are identified under NCLB as needing improvement. The maximum amount of the voucher, which is awarded through an applicant lottery, is \$7,500. Participating private schools can select voucher students using their regular admissions procedures and can charge parents additional tuition and fees above the voucher amount. Although the law does not require the private schools to test students or publicly report achievement results, Congress did provide for an evaluation of the program, beginning in its initial operating year (2004-05). The U.S. Department of Education awarded the evaluation contract to Westat, an independent evaluation firm, and Georgetown University's Patrick Wolf, who is considered a voucher advocate.
- The voucher law mandates an evaluation that compares the achievement of students who won and used a voucher with students who lost in the voucher lottery. But too few eligible students applied for the 1,613 vouchers, leaving too few "losers" for the evaluation to be run in the mandated way, at least in the important baseline year. Of the 1,359 students who won the voucher lottery, at least 290 (21.3 percent) did not use the voucher.¹⁷

- Although Congress mandated that students in public schools identified by NCLB as needing improvement should get priority in receiving vouchers, 15.4 percent of voucher students (prekindergarten and kindergarten) had never even attended school before, and 19.4 percent had attended a private school the year before. Only 74, or fewer than 6 percent, of the 1,359 voucher lottery winners came from public schools that fit Congress's "priority." How many of these 74 students were among the 1,013 voucher awardees who actually gained admission to a private school is unknown.¹⁸

Privately Financed Voucher Programs

- Among the numerous studies of non-publicly funded voucher programs, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)¹⁹ identified only three that were "rigorous enough to meet our criteria for inclusion." Each of these studies of programs in Washington, D.C., Dayton, Ohio, and New York City included voucher advocate Paul Peterson on the research team.²⁰
- Both in their reports and in the press, the Peterson research teams claimed to find large achievement gains for African-American voucher students, but not for whites or Hispanics. The GAO review concurred that vouchers were ineffective for whites and Hispanics in all three cities; it also found that in Washington, D.C. and Dayton, there was no difference in the achievement of African-American voucher users and that of the public school comparison group either.²¹
- The GAO validated only the New York City study that showed achievement gains for low-income African-American students who used vouchers while in grades 1-4. However, the GAO also called attention to a then-unpublished analysis of the New York study by Alan Krueger and Pei Zhu of Princeton University, noting that "Their findings raise doubts about the size and significance of earlier findings of a positive effect of vouchers on test scores for African American students."²²
- Krueger and Zhu's analysis of the New York voucher study appeared in January 2003, about six months after the GAO report. Among other problems, they found that the Peterson team had excluded scores for about 40 percent of the students in the sample and had used a novel classification of student race. When the data were corrected, the Peterson team's much-vaunted "miracle" results for African-American voucher students in New York disappeared. "The safest conclusion," observed Krueger and Zhu, "is probably that the provision of vouchers did not lower the scores of African American students."²³
- Krueger and Diane M. Whitmore compared the Peterson team's *uncorrected*, positive voucher results for African-American students to the results obtained for African-American students in the Tennessee class-size reduction experiment, which is considered the most rigorous experiment ever conducted in education. Even using Peterson's inflated results, Krueger and Whitmore found that black students in small classes for two years "improved their test performance by around 50 percent more than the gain experienced by black students who attended a private school as a result of receiving a voucher in the New York, Dayton and D.C. voucher experiments."²⁴

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Endnotes

¹ Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, MPCP Facts and Figures for 2004-2005, As of November 2004, posted at www.dpi.state.wi.us.

² John Witte et al., *Achievement Effects of the Milwaukee Voucher Program*, Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, Robert M. LaFollette Institute of Public Affairs, 1997; John Witte, *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³ Jay Greene, Paul Peterson, and Jiangtao Du, "The Effectiveness of School Choice in Milwaukee: A Secondary Analysis of Data from the Program's Evaluation," Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, 1996.

⁴ Cecilia Elena Rouse, "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 113, no. 5, May 1998. For further information on the strengths and weakness of the official MPCP study and its two reanalyses, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *School Vouchers: Publicly Funded Programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee*, Washington, D.C., August 2001, pp. 45-46.

⁵ Rouse, "Schools and Student Achievement: More Evidence from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," *Economic Policy Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, March 1998.

⁶ Ohio State Board of Education, *Budget & Policy Recommendations of the State Board of Education to the Governor and Members of the 126th Ohio General Assembly, 2006-2007 Biennium*, December 2004, pp. 43-44, 58, available at www.ode.state.oh.us/legislator/default.asp.

⁷ Kim Metcalf et al., *Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program 1998-2003*, Executive Summary, October, 2004; Summary Report, 1998-2003; Technical Report 1998-2003, Bloomington, Ind., October 2004, available at <http://www.crlt.indiana.edu/research/cstpe.html>.

⁸ Ibid., Summary Report, pp. 6-8, 10-12; Technical Report, pp. 40-61, 77-130.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., but see especially the Technical Report.

¹¹ An independent evaluation is being conducted by a team led by Jane Hannaway of the Urban Institute, but the state had no role in its initiation or funding. No results have been released to date.

¹² Jay P. Greene, "An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program," New York. N.Y.: Manhattan Institute, Feb. 15, 2001.

¹³ Doug Harris, "What Caused the Effects of the Florida A+ Program: Ratings or Vouchers?" in Martin Carnoy, ed., *Do School Vouchers Improve Student Performance?* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2001). To test Harris's findings against Greene's, another set of researchers examined achievement gains in Texas and North Carolina—two states with high-stakes and high-publicity accountability systems that do not include vouchers—and compared them to those in Florida. Although they found them flawed, the researchers used Greene's methods. In both of the non-voucher states, the researchers independently found that achievement gains in low-performing schools were as high or higher than those in comparable Florida schools. While this did not necessarily prove that ratings caused school improvement, it did disprove Greene's claim that the cause was the threat of vouchers. See Amanda Brownson, "A Replication of Jay Greene's Voucher Effect Study Using Texas Performance Data," in Carnoy, 2001, and Helen F. Ladd and Elizabeth J. Glennie, "A Replication of Jay Greene's Voucher Effect Study Using North Carolina Data," in Ibid. Greene's claim that vouchers caused school improvement in Florida is also contradicted by David N. Figlio and Cecilia Elena Rouse in a study using Florida data; see "Do Accountability and Voucher Threats Improve Low-Performing Schools?" National Bureau of Economic Research, revised August 2004, at http://www.aeaweb.org/annual_mtg_papers/2005/0109_0800_0303.pdf.

¹⁴ Gregory Camilli and Katrina Bulkley, "Critique of 'An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program,'" *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, vol. 9, no. 7, March 4, 2001, available at

<http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v9n7/>. In a separate reanalysis, Haggai Kupermintz of the University of Colorado argued that improvements in the low-achieving schools were more specious than real and could be relatively easily produced just by concentrating on boosting scores on the state's writing test. "The Effects of Vouchers on School Improvement: Another Look at the Florida Data," *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, vol. 9, no. 7, March 19, 2001, available at <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v9n8/>.

¹⁵ Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, "When Schools Compete: The Effects of Vouchers on Florida Public School Achievement," New York, N.Y.: Manhattan Institute, Education Working Paper No. 2, August 2003, http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_02.htm.

¹⁶ "[Florida] House Choice and Innovation Committee, Florida's School Choice Scholarships: History & Accountability Measures," Jan. 11, 2005, http://www.fldoe.org/gr/pdf/presentations/01-11-05_Choice_Innovation.pdf; Carolyn Henrie, "Vouchers: The Florida Experiment," *Education Week*, Jan. 8, 2004, accessed from <http://counts.edweek.org/sreports/qc04/article.cfm?slug=17allmeans-s3.h23>; Florida Department of Education, Independent Education and Parental Choice, personal communication, Mar. 5, 2005 (McKay Vouchers Cost, 2004-05); Andrew J. Rotherham and Sara Mead, "Think Twice: Special Education Vouchers Are Not All Right," Washington, D.C.: Progressive Policy Institute Policy Report, June 2003; R. Craig Wood and J. Robert McClure III, "The Florida Special Education Voucher Plan: A Status Report," *Journal of Education Finance*, vol. 29, Fall 2003, pp. 359-66; "Jeopardizing a Legacy: A Closer Look at IDEA and Florida's Disability Vouchers," Washington, D.C.: People for the American Way, <http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=9063>.

¹⁷ Sewell Chan, "Many D.C. School Vouchers Go Unused, 290 Students Forgo \$7,500 Tuition Grants," *Washington Post*, B2, p. 1, September 1, 2004; Flaws and Failings: A Preliminary Look at the Problems Already Encountered in the Implementation of the District of Columbia's New Federally Mandated School Voucher Program, Washington, D.C.: People for the American Way (PFAW), February 2005, <http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=17828>.

¹⁸ Chan, B2, p.2; PFAW, 2005.

¹⁹ When the report was published, the office was named the U.S. General Accounting Office.

²⁰ "School Vouchers: Characteristics of Privately Funded Programs," Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, September 2002, p. 11, available at www.gao.gov/. For a list of the reports on the Washington, D.C., Dayton and New York City studies reviewed by GAO, see pp. 35-6.

²¹ Ibid.; see p. 17 especially for a summary.

²² Ibid., p.16, footnote 11. The Krueger and Zhu analysis referenced by the GAO was presented at the Yale University Conference on Randomized Experimentation in the Social Sciences on Aug. 16, 2002, one month before the GAO report was released. At that point, the analysis had not been finalized.

²³ Alan Krueger and Pei Zhu, "Another Look at the New York City School Voucher Experiment," <http://www.irs.princeton.edu/pubs/pdfs/470.pdf>; Michael Winerip, "What Some Much-Noted Data Really Showed About Vouchers," *New York Times*, May 7, 2003, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/07/education/07EDUC.html>. For prior indications of problems with the New York City voucher data, see "Voucher Claims of Success Are Premature in New York City: Second Year Results Show No Overall Differences in Test Scores Between Those Who Were Offered Vouchers and Those Who Were Not," Washington, D.C.: Mathematica [Paul Peterson's subcontractor on the New York evaluation], Sept. 15, 2000, and Kate Zernike, "New Doubt Is Cast on Study that Backs Voucher Efforts, Black Youths' Gains Are Called Overstated," *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 2000, A21.

²⁴ Alan Krueger and Diane M. Whitmore, "Would Smaller Classes Help Close the Black-White Achievement Gap?" March 21, 2001, <http://www.irs.princeton.edu/pubs/pdfs/451.pdf>.